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## Officer Career Development: Preliminary Surface Warfare Officer Perceptions of a Major Career Path Change

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**Officer Career Development: Preliminary Surface Warfare  
Officer Perceptions of a Major Career Path Change**

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## FOREWORD

This research and development was conducted within the exploratory development project RM33M20 (Manpower and Personnel Technology), work unit RM33M20.06 (Career and Occupational Design, Personnel Distribution and Career Development). The purpose of the work unit is to identify career factors that are related to performance, officer continuance rates, and the development of skills necessary at senior officer levels.

This report is the ninth in a series produced under this work unit. Previous reports described: (1) the factors that influence the early career development of Surface Warfare Officers (SWOs) (TR 82-59), (2) background and initial sea tour factors that predict SWO continuance beyond obligated service (TR 83-6), (3) SWO career experiences and concerns (TN 83-11), (4) aviation detailer decision making in the antisubmarine warfare patrol community (TR 84-31), (5) career development problems of three Unrestricted Line (URL) officer communities (TR 88-13), (6) reactions of General URLs and SWOs to detailers (TN 87-40), (7) URL officer perceptions of joint duty assignments (TN 88-26), and (8) General URL officer perceptions of the dual-career track (in review).

Appreciation is expressed to CDR Lloyd Swift, the SWO Community Manager, for his help in educating researchers on the Navy policy restructuring the SWO career path and for his help in arranging the interviews.

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## SUMMARY

### Problem

NAVOP 105 was implemented to increase the technical knowledge and skills of department heads in the surface community, and thus hopefully, operational readiness. Toward this end, a more specialized Surface Warfare Officer (SWO) career path was instituted, so that division officers were required to obtain experience in two departments and then were selected, based on their performance, for a specific department head assignment. After implementing this career path change, the Navy faced the problem of evaluating its acceptance in the fleet.

### Objectives

The objective of this research was to provide preliminary data for policy makers that would help them evaluate the acceptance of NAVOP 105 in the fleet, its impact on officer career decisions, and, to a lesser extent, its effect on departmental readiness.

### Approach

Questionnaires were completed by 2,583 SWOs as part of an ongoing research project studying the impact of career management policies on officer career decisions and actions. A special section in the questionnaire addressed issues pertinent to NAVOP 105. These questionnaire items were analyzed to obtain basic reactions to the career changes and were also analyzed in relation to officer career decisions, such as whether to make the Navy a career. Eighty-one interviews were conducted to better understand and explain questionnaire results.

### Results

Officers were generally pleased with the career-path changes implemented through NAVOP 105. Close to 80 percent of the officers believed that increasing the technical competence of department heads was a step in the right direction. Almost as many individuals (73%) believed that NAVOP 105 would produce at least some improvement in fleet readiness. There was no preliminary indication that NAVOP 105 would have any impact, one way or the other, on an individual's desire to make the Navy a career or to extend their stay beyond 20 years.

### Conclusions

It was concluded, based on initial results, that surface officers have favorably received the career path change promulgated by NAVOP 105 and support its underlying philosophy and goals.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. The Navy should evaluate the long-term impact of NAVOP 105 on operational readiness and officer continuance decisions.
2. Research should be conducted at various points in time to determine if NAVOP 105 is the cause of increments or decrements in operational readiness and retention.
3. Efforts should be renewed to develop reliable, objective measures of department and fleet readiness.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background and Problem

In 1983, the surface community underwent a major adjustment in the career path prescribed for Surface Warfare Officers (SWOs). These changes reflected the belief that the old career path was not providing SWOs with either the type of training or assignment experiences needed to adjust to rapidly changing shipboard technologies. This view was most directly expressed by Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Surface Warfare) VADM Robert L. Walters (1982):

Historically, our surface officers have been "jacks of all trades," focusing on all areas of shipboard readiness in preparation for command-at-sea. The challenge for these officers has been in keeping pace with talented specialists and rapidly changing complex systems, thus calling for more technical knowledge among our midgrade officers. The ability of the "well rounded" officer to acquire the technical proficiency required to successfully manage a specific (operations, combat systems, engineering) field has become questionable.

Reflecting these concerns, a Surface Warfare Panel, composed of members from the Naval Military Personnel Command (NMPC-41) and Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (DCNO) (OP-03 and OP-130E) and chaired by DCNO (OP-130E1) was created with the specific task of assessing the feasibility and impact of increasing SWO specialization. The results of this effort became the basis for the revised career path outlined in NAVOP 105 (see Figure 1).

The primary objective of the new career path was to enhance the expertise and experience of middle grade SWOs, principally department heads, in a specific warfare area. To achieve this objective, a number of changes in the structure of the SWO career path were made. At the division level, this entailed the rotation of division officers through at least two departments during their initial sea tour. Thus, rotation serves two objectives. First, it provides the officer with diverse shipboard experiences from which the officer may later draw. Second, observing junior officers in multiple departments provides commanding officers (COs) with a broad data base from which to match an officer's particular abilities and interests with the requirements of specific departments. At the department head level, the new career path means that an officer will specialize in one of the departments in which he has had division officer experience (i.e., shipboard operations, engineering, or combat systems/weapons).

The authors of NAVOP 105 recognized that while specific technological knowledge was critical to being an effective department head, a general technological understanding of all shipboard systems is critical to being an effective ship executive officer (XO) or CO. Reflecting this view, the perspective executive officer (PXO) pipeline has been restructured so that PXOs are cross-trained and thus have experience in all three departments. This helps ensure that the XO/CO will have the necessary technological understanding to effectively employ their platform.

When discussing the implementation of the new career path, VADM Walters stressed that its success would depend on the support it receives from all levels in the chain of command. In other words, effective implementation depends on the support these changes receive from both the officers who must implement these changes (NMPC-4, OP-130, etc.), as well as officers in the fleet.



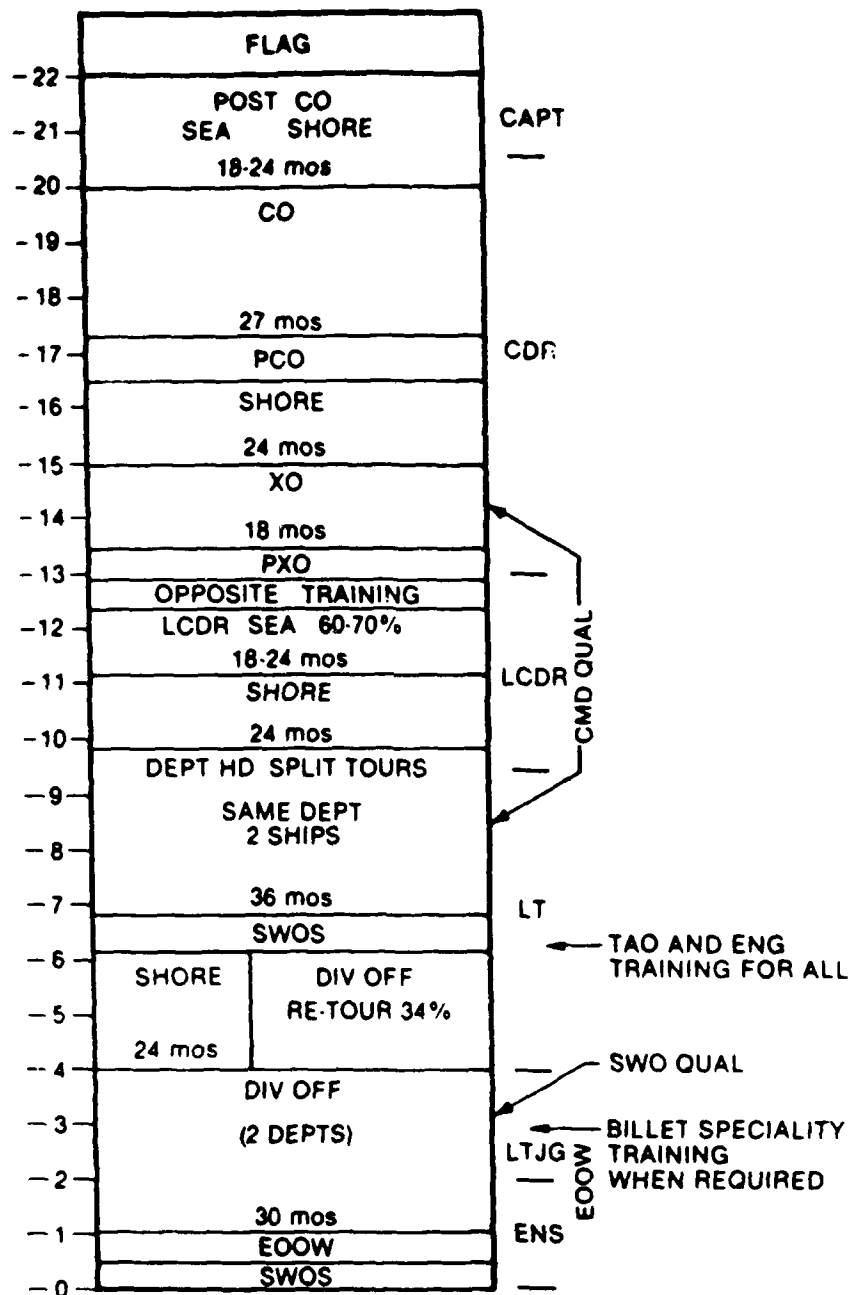


Figure 1. New SWO career path.

The Navy Personnel Research and Development Center (NAVPERSRANDCEN) initiated a research program in FY82 that continues today and has as its focus officer career development. Two studies have been conducted that are pertinent to NAVOP 105. First, the research program's FY82 data bank was used to help assess the impact of specialization on the continuance decisions of officers. The evaluation in 1982 indicated that specialization would not be expected to influence career intention. A second study associated with NAVPERSRANDCEN's research program (Chatfield & Morrison, 1987) attempted to evaluate the effect of NAVOP 105 using fleet performance data. This attempt was unsuccessful, because the Navy's measures of readiness change so often that comparisons across time could not be made.

Morrison and Cook (1985) describe the research design and concepts underlying NAVPERSRANDCEN's research program on officer career development. This project is concerned with predicting and evaluating the impact of career management policies and practices on Unrestricted Line (URL) officers. A major premise of the NAVPERSRANDCEN project is that the impact of policies can be measured by the types of career decisions officers make and the career actions they take. Thus, in 1982, over 9,000 URLs (AWOs, SWOs, and General URLs) completed a questionnaire that focused on career decisions, the sequence in which they occur, the factors influencing them, and the actions officers take to implement such decisions. To expand the FY82 data base, a second wave of questionnaire data was collected in 1986 from over 12,000 current or former URL officers, including those who had changed designators, attrited, or retired. For those officers in the surface community in 1986, additional questionnaire items about NAVOP 105 were included.

Any evaluation of NAVOP 105 would have to be preliminary. The program only started in 1983 and had to be introduced into the career management process in a way that did not jeopardize immediate fleet manpower requirements. This constraint meant that the first entire class to graduate from the SWOs department head course under the new policy graduated in FY85. Thus, NAVOP 105 cannot be considered fully implemented until FY88 or later after these officers have completed their department head tours. Only at that time could a full evaluation be conducted.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this research was to assess the initial reactions of surface officers to the new career path outlined in NAVOP 105. Specifically, two questions were addressed:

1. How favorably do SWOs perceive NAVOP 105 career path changes?
2. How strongly do these perceptions relate to the career decisions that officers make, such as intention to remain in the Navy or to strive for command at sea?

## METHOD

### Questionnaire Sample

In FY82, the SWO Career Questionnaire was mailed to all SWOs in commissioning years 1961 through 1976, and, because of the larger numbers entering the Navy, a random sample of SWOs was drawn from each commissioning year beginning in 1977 and concluding with 1980. In late FY86, a modified version of the SWO Career Questionnaire was sent to the same individuals, if they were still in the SWO community, and to a sample of SWOs from commissioning years 1981 through 1985; a total of 5,710 officers. Slightly over 50 percent of these officers completed and returned their questionnaires (N = 2,875). Officers who were not nuclear-qualified or in training to become so, and who were commissioned between 1961 and 1985, were included in the present study of NAVOP 105 (N = 2,583). Of the 2,583 SWOs, 23 are women.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on the questionnaire sample and the SWO population. The last column in the table (see "Power") provides one indication that sample results can be generalized to the population. For example, it is estimated that there is only a 46 out of a 1000 chance, or less, that sample results would not represent ENS opinions in the population.

Given that the power statistic is .050 or less, comparing columns 1 and 2 ("% of Sample" and "% of Population") gives another indication of how representative the sample is of the entire SWO population. The only meaningful difference in the percentage breakdowns by grade is at the commander (CDR) level, where a greater proportion of CDRs were prevalent in the sample than in the population. Otherwise, the questionnaire sample can be considered to be representative, by grade, of all SWOs in the Navy. Thus, there is reason to believe that opinions of officers in the sample are similar to those of the entire population of SWOs.

### Data Collection

Data sources that were used in the analysis of reactions to NAVOP 105 included both questionnaires and interviews.

#### Questionnaire

SWOs were asked to complete the SWO Career Questionnaire as part of the larger study that focused on URL officers. The SWO Career Questionnaire covers a broad spectrum of career issues; in particular, the career decisions officers make, the sequence in which they make them, the factors influencing them, and the actions they take to implement them. In the present report, only those items relevant to NAVOP 105 were examined. They are presented in the Results section of this report.

#### Interviews

In early FY87, group interview sessions were held with individuals from SURFLANT (N = 55), and individual interviews were conducted with officers from SURFPAC (N = 26). Interviewed officers represented billets from CO afloat to division officers, CAPT through ensign (ENS). No attempt was made to obtain a representative sample, since the sole purposes of the interviews were to aid in the interpretation of questionnaire responses and the development of recommendations. Interviews were semi-structured and ranged in length from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Table 1  
Sample and Population Description by Grade

| Grade | % of Sample | % of Population | Sample N | Population N | % of Sample/<br>Population <sup>a</sup> | Power <sup>b</sup> |
|-------|-------------|-----------------|----------|--------------|---|--------------------|
| ENS   | 14.4        | 16.9            | 373      | 1,694        | 22.0                                    | .046               |
| LTJG  | 21.1        | 20.5            | 545      | 2,048        | 26.6                                    | .037               |
| LT    | 28.3        | 31.2            | 730      | 3,114        | 23.4                                    | .032               |
| LCDR  | 14.0        | 15.0            | 361      | 1,505        | 24.0                                    | .046               |
| CDR   | 17.0        | 11.9            | 438      | 1,196        | 36.6                                    | .038               |
| CAPT  | 5.2         | 4.5             | 136      | 454          | 30.0                                    | .072               |
| Total | 100.0       | 100.0           | 2,583    | 10,011       | 25.8                                    | .017               |

Note. SWOs were only included in these analyses if they had no nuclear training and they had been commissioned between 1961 and 1985.

<sup>a</sup>These percentages are the result of dividing the Sample N by the Population N.

<sup>b</sup>The closer the value is to .05 or below, the more confidence one can have that survey results for a given grade are representative of what would be obtained for the entire population at that grade.

### Analyses

Frequencies, means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation<sup>r</sup> were computed on questionnaire items and scales.

## RESULTS

### Perceptions of NAVOP 105 Changes

Perceptions of NAVOP 105 were assessed by seven questions that focus on the major changes in the SWO career path.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Questionnaire items are designated in the text and figures with the same enumerations as were present in the questionnaire. For example, Figure 2 presents an item designated as F25 (Section F, Item 25).

### Rotation of Junior Officers

A major component of NAVOP 105 is the rotating of all division officers to at least two departments in the same ship during the initial sea tour. Division officer rotation was designed to broaden the junior SWO's experience base. Figure 2 shows the responses of SWOs when they were asked whether rotation of division officers would help them to become a better department head. Approximately 83 percent of the responding officers believed that better department heads would result, with less than 10 percent disagreeing. Interviews with division officers supported this finding (i.e., they felt that rotation between departments was providing them with a better feel for shipboard operations). However, division officers expressed some frustration at beginning to master an area, and then being rotated and having to begin again. A related concern or problem was expressed by shipboard department heads. Department heads often stated that the rotation of division officers meant their departments were in constant change. A division officer will just become competent in an area and then be rotated. This results in the department head feeling that he must do his division officer's job, as well as his own.

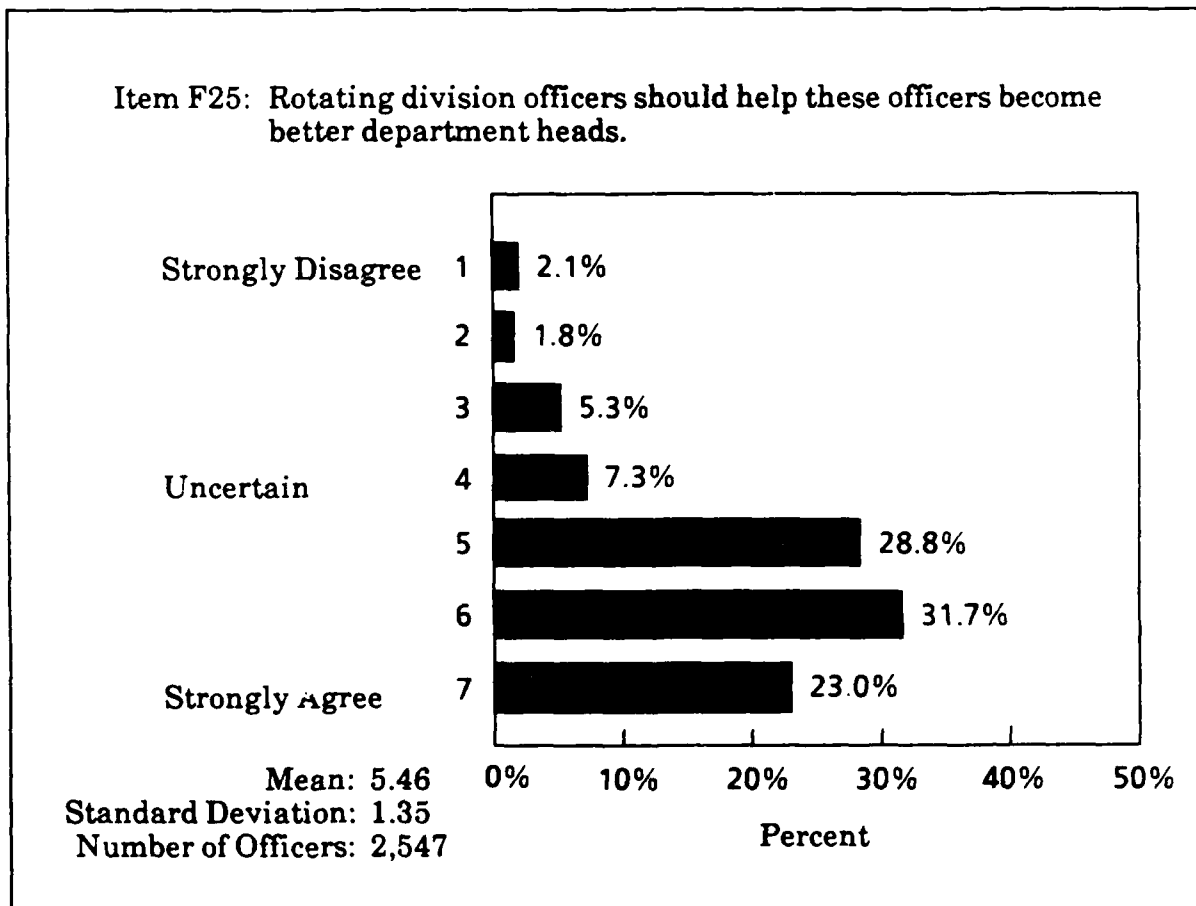


Figure 2. Reactions to rotating division officers.

### Technical Competence of Division Officers

Figure 3 shows questionnaire responses to an item proposing that more emphasis be placed on developing the technical competence of division officers rather than department heads. Over half of the officers agreed. This finding conflicted with the opinions of several senior SWOs interviewed who believed that too many demands were already being placed on division officers. While they believed that more technical preparation for division officers would be desirable, they felt that demands, both technical and otherwise, are already reaching undesirable proportions.

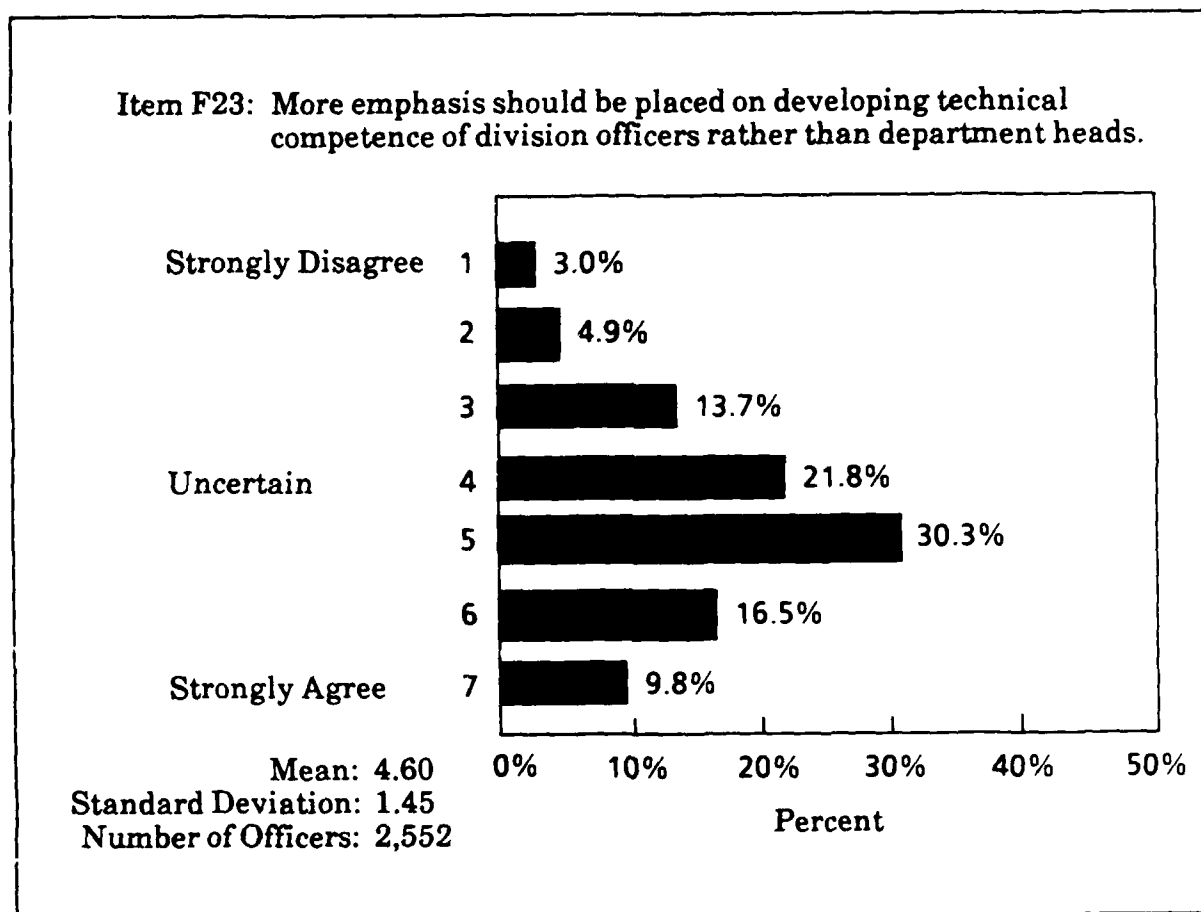


Figure 3. Reactions to developing the technical competence of division officers.

### Specialization and Departmental Readiness

A major goal of NAVOP 105 is to increase the technical competence of department heads by placing a greater emphasis on specialization. The emphasis on department head technical competence is based on the assumption that this emphasis will be translated into increased departmental readiness.

As shown in Figure 4, the majority of SWOs (63%) agree that departmental readiness will result from increased department head specialization. This result is consistent with comments from interviewed SWOs. A number of XOs and COs stated that their department heads were better technically prepared than they had been when they were department heads. Their technical preparation in conjunction with their superior managerial skills has led, in the opinions of XOs and COs, to higher levels of operational readiness.

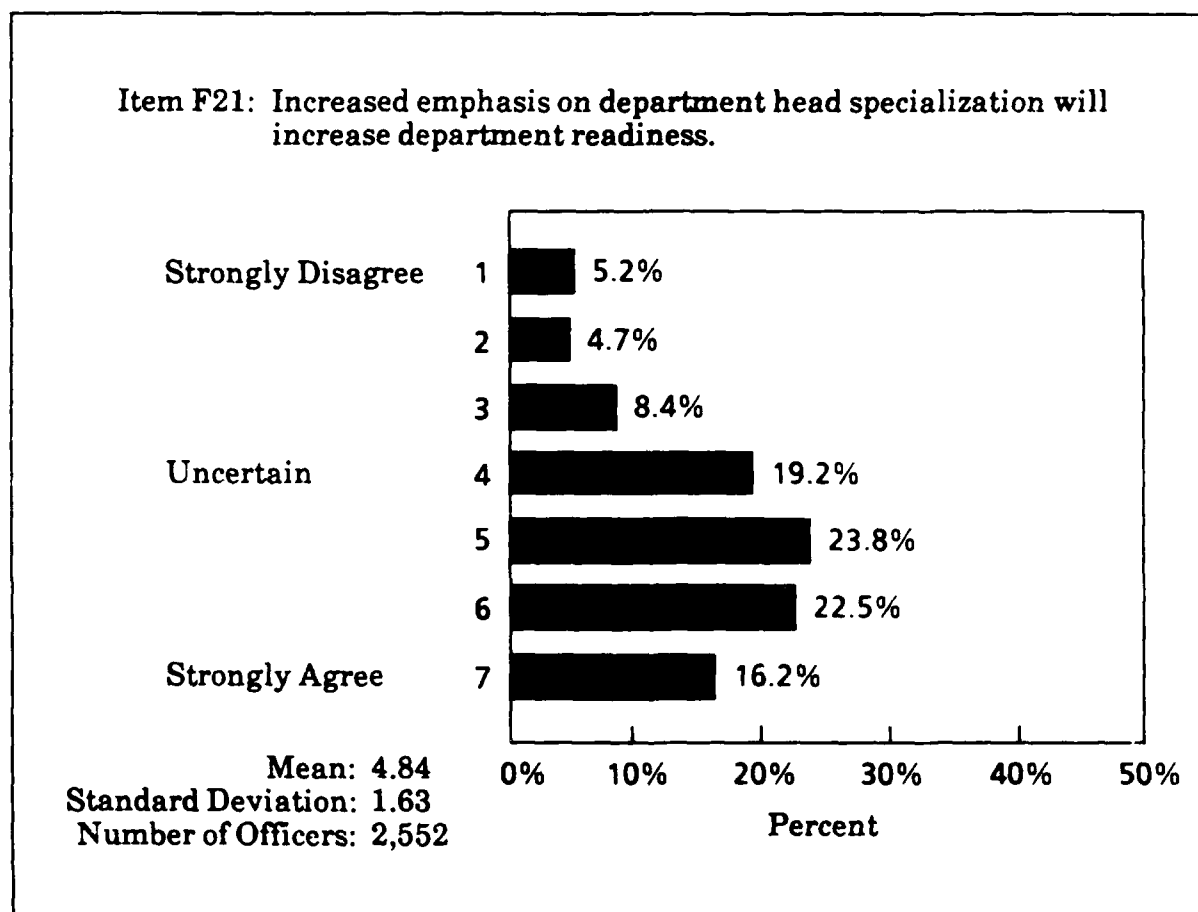


Figure 4. Reactions to increasing department head specialization.

### Technical Competence and Performance

SWOs were also asked two questions concerning the current level of technical competence among officers. Figures 5 and 6 summarize the results. Opinions were mixed. For example, many respondents (37%) disagreed that officers are well trained technically and that the problem really lies in other areas, such as training in nontechnical areas. While more (48%) felt that officers were well trained technically and needed improvement in other factors, a significant number (15%) were uncertain (Figure 5). Similar mixed results were obtained when respondents were asked if they agreed that officers were technically well trained and that the real problem lay in transitioning from expert to manager as one transitions from division officer to department head (Figure 6). In the interviews, a number of SWOs stated that the issue was not technical competence, but the necessary mix of technical and managerial skills.

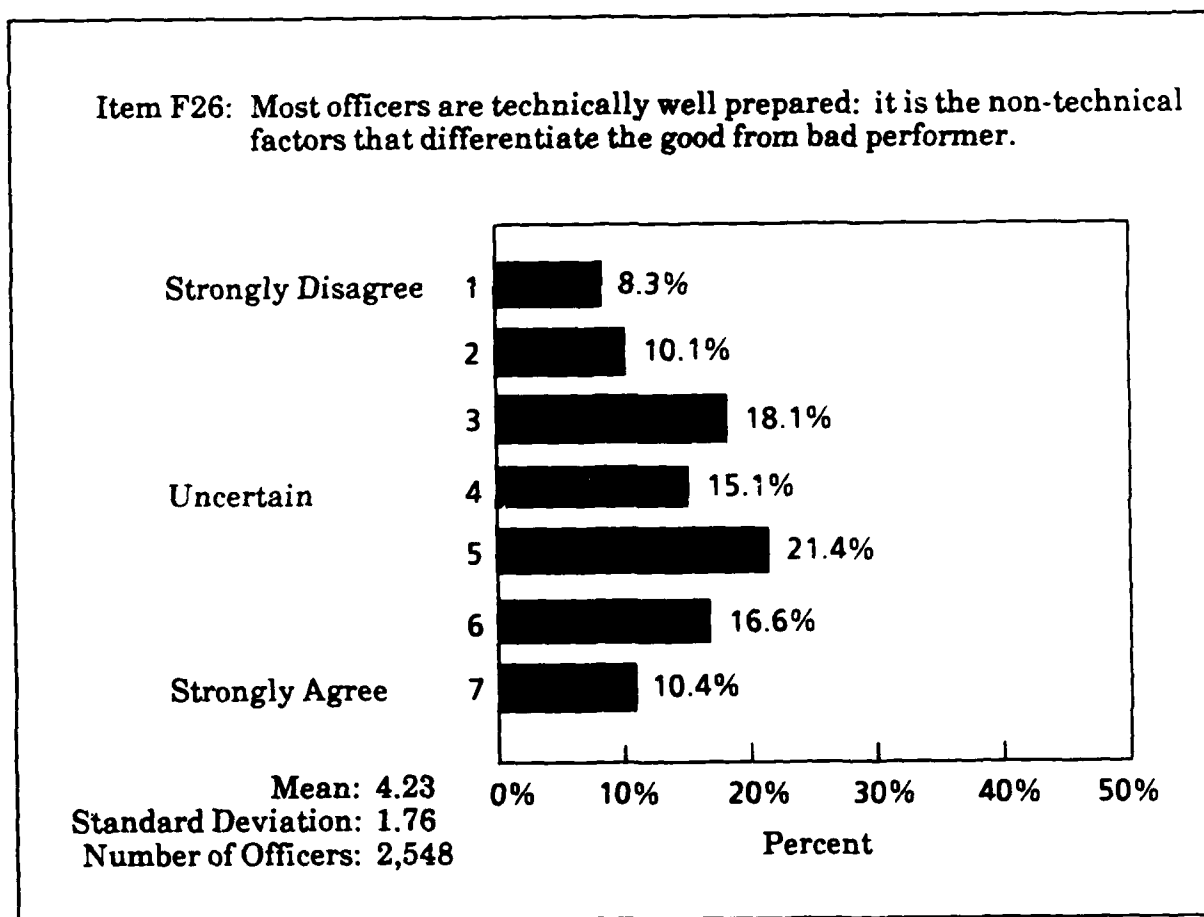


Figure 5. Opinions regarding the importance to performance of technical and nontechnical factors.



**Item F28: Most department heads are technically well prepared: the problem for most officers is in the transition from technical expert (div. head) to manager (dept. head).**

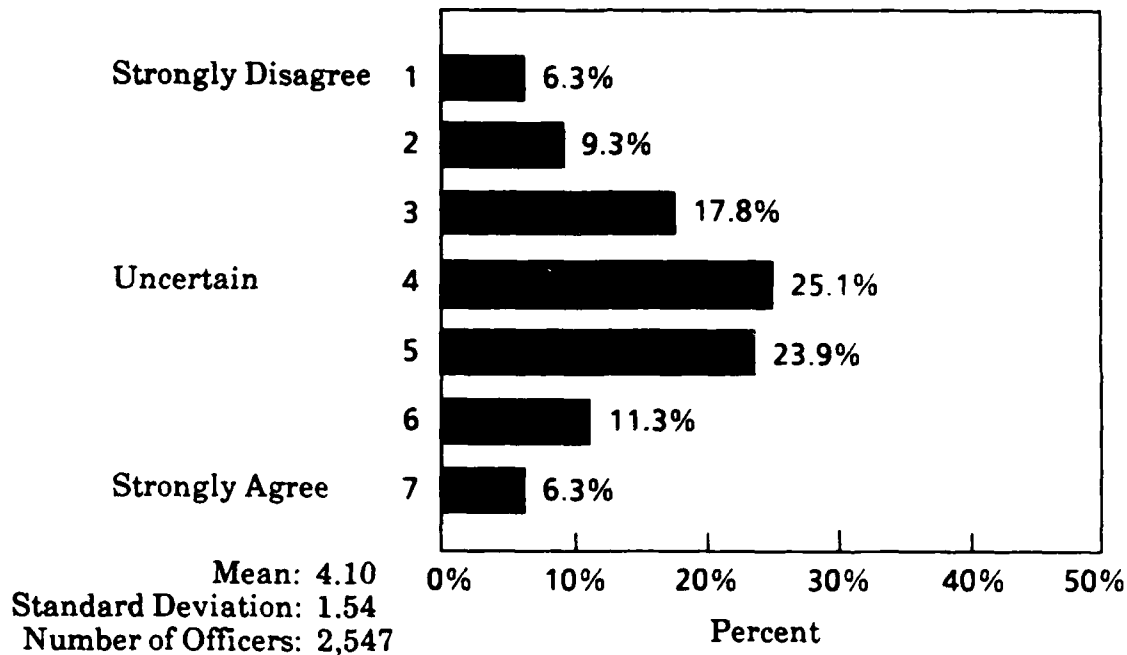


Figure 6. Perceptions regarding whether problem resides at the division or departmental level.

#### Department Head Experience and XO/CO Performance

The designers of NAVOP 105 recognized that, unlike the department head assignment, a ship's XO and CO must have a general understanding of all shipboard systems. Thus, SWOs were asked two questions; first, whether they believed that each department head assignment equally prepared an officer to be CO (F27 in Figure 7). The majority of SWOs (58%) disagreed. Most SWOs in the interviews stated that while policy emphasizes that no department is better than another, operations and combat systems are perceived as better than engineering for preparing an officer to become a ship's CO. SWOs stated that being "up top" gives the officer a better chance to view the ship as a whole. Further, engineering department heads stated that once in engineering an officer is less likely to have either the time or the opportunity to obtain the other qualifications necessary for XO screen.

**Item F27: No department head job is better than another in preparing an officer to be CO.**

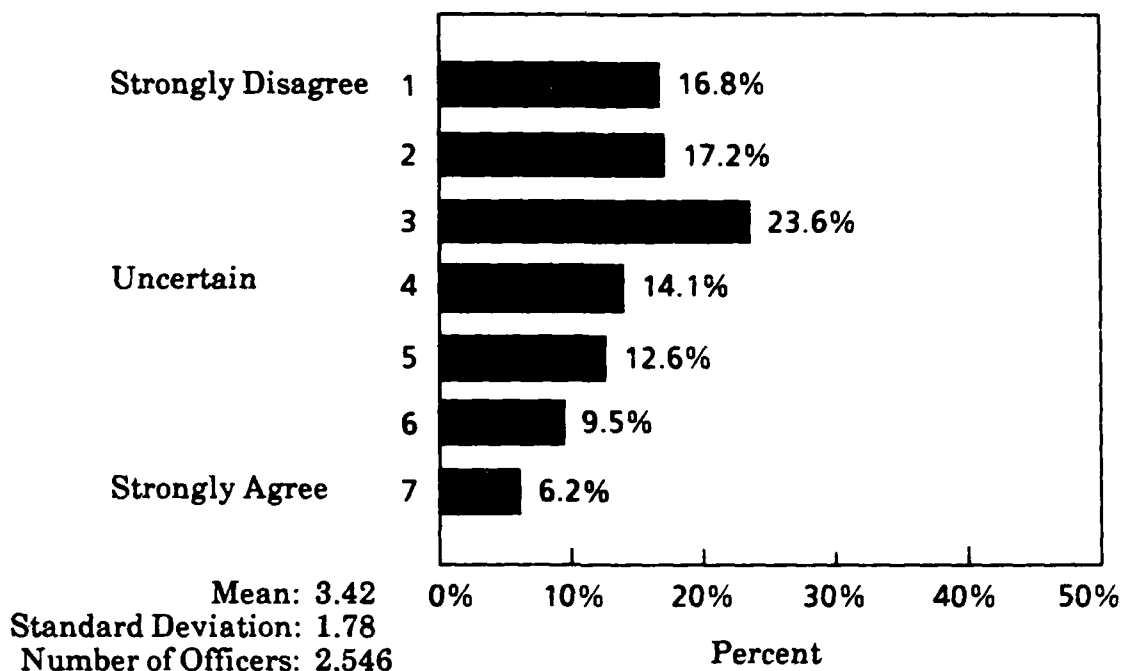


Figure 7. Attitudes regarding the professional-development value of different department head positions.

SWOs were also asked in the questionnaire if the increased specialization would result in officers who are less prepared to face the problems of XO/CO assignments. Fifty-five percent agreed (see Figure 8). Thus, when the two questions are considered, they seem to indicate that specialization may limit opportunity for command, unless a strong program is present to help the officer transition from specialist (department head) to generalist (XO). For example, the officer needs to serve in certain departments, especially operations, that allow him to develop an overall knowledge of ship operations. In other departments, transition training and early department head assignment would seem critical to prepare officers for XO/CO duties.

**Item F24: Increased specialization will result in officers who are less prepared to deal with problems they will face as XO/CO.**

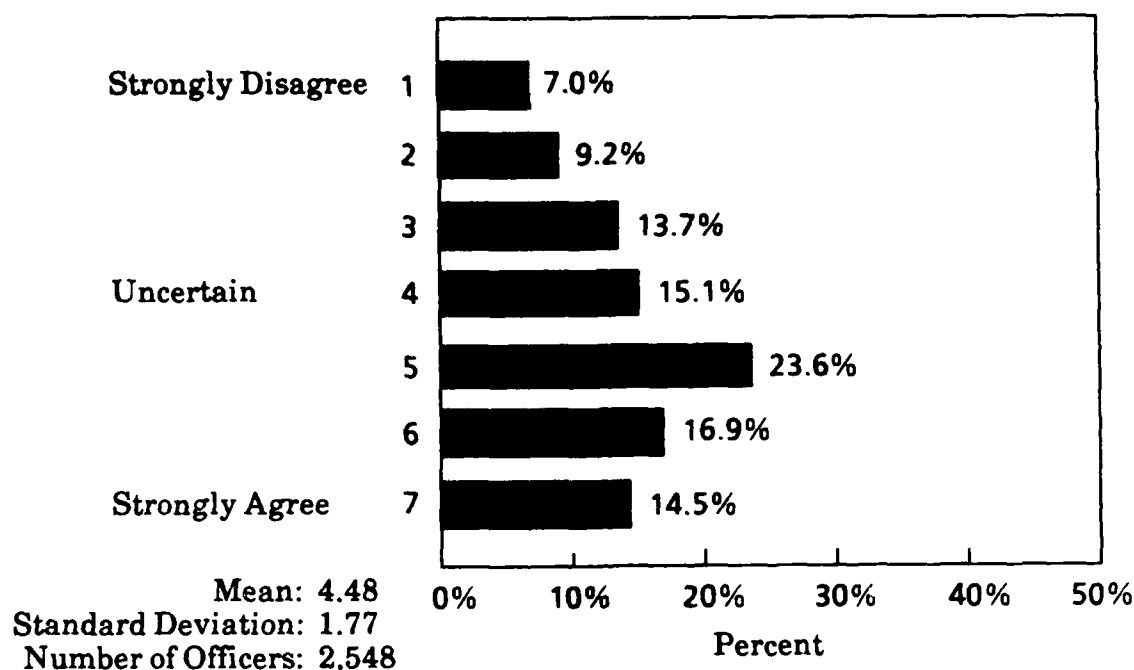


Figure 8. Perceived impact on executive officer/commanding officer performance as a result of increased specialization at department head level.

#### Overall Perceptions of NAVOP 105

SWOs were also asked to indicate their overall opinions of NAVOP 105. As can be seen in Table 2, half of the officers believed that these changes were the right balance between the specialist and generalist orientation. The remaining half were nearly equally split between favoring the increased emphasis on specialization and emphasizing less specialization. These results may indicate that NAVOP 105 is appropriate as is. Many officers portrayed this view in the interviews by stating they were in favor of the changes in the present career path, but were against more changes. In other words, these officers felt that a period of stabilization was needed in the community.

A major objective of NAVOP 105 was to upgrade fleet readiness. Table 3 shows the responses of SWOs when asked if, in their opinion, readiness would be improved as a result of the career path changes. Seventy-three percent of the responding officers indicated that they believed that fleet readiness would either be greatly improved (11%) or somewhat improved (62%) by NAVOP 105 changes. The remaining individuals believed that fleet readiness would not be affected (17%) or would be reduced (9%) by these changes.

Table 2  
Perceptions Regarding Increased Technical Competence  
and the Specialist-Generalist Issue

Item F29. Recent revisions in the SWO career path were introduced to increase an officer's technical competence and experience base, especially at the department head level. Which of the following three statements best summarizes your opinion of these changes?

|  | N     | %     |
|--|-------|-------|
| 1. The SWO career changes are a step in the right direction. We need more emphasis on specialization.      | 700   | 27.8  |
| 2. The SWO career changes have produced the right balance between a specialist and generalist orientation. | 1,267 | 50.4  |
| 3. The SWO career changes represent a setback. SWOs should be generalists, not specialists.                | 548   | 21.8  |
| Total  | 2,515 | 100.0 |

Table 3  
Opinions Regarding the Impact on Fleet Readiness of the New  
Surface Warfare Officer Career Path

Item F30. Which of the following statements best reflects your opinion of how the new SWO career path will impact on fleet performance/readiness?

|  | N     | %     |
|--|-------|-------|
| Fleet readiness will be greatly improved.  | 277   | 11.0  |
| Fleet readiness will be somewhat improved. | 1,563 | 62.0  |
| Fleet readiness will not be affected.      | 442   | 17.5  |
| Fleet readiness will be somewhat reduced.  | 218   | 8.7   |
| Fleet readiness will be greatly reduced.   | 20    | .8    |
| Total                                      | 2,520 | 100.0 |

A correlation of .58 ( $p < .001$ ) was found between the two items in Tables 2 and 3 that measure overall perceptions of NAVOP 105. This result means that the more strongly an officer believed that the career path changes have produced the right balance between a specialist and generalist orientation, the more strongly he believed that fleet readiness would be improved.

Of the seven items measuring specific aspects of NAVOP 105, only two correlated appreciably with the two overall perceptual items. Specifically, the more strongly an officer believed that the increased emphasis on department head specialization will increase departmental readiness (Item F21), the more strongly he believed that NAVOP 105 was a step in the right direction (F29) ( $r = .40, p < .001$ ) and that fleet readiness would be improved (F30) ( $r = .42, p < .001$ ). Further, the more strongly he disagreed that increased specialization will increase the problems of being XO or CO, the more strongly he believed that NAVOP 105 was a step in the right direction ( $r = -.42, p < .001$ ) and that fleet readiness would be improved ( $r = -.36, p < .001$ ).

#### Differences by Grade

Correlations of grade with the nine NAVOP 105 items varied from .11 to -.13, indicating that opinions of NAVOP 105 did not vary in any appreciable way by grade.

#### Satisfaction with Navy and SWO Community

The following issue was examined when evaluating the impact of NAVOP 105: Are officers who are planning to make, or have already made, a commitment to the Navy and a SWO career more satisfied with NAVOP 105 than officers who are planning to leave the Navy or the SWO community?

For junior officers (ENSs and LTJGs), their responses to the item asking whether they planned to make the Navy a career (yes, no, or undecided) were examined in relationship to the two items assessing overall reactions to NAVOP 105. Correlations of .06 and .17 were obtained with F29 (NAVOP 105 was a step in the right direction) and F30 (NAVOP 105 will improve fleet performance), respectively.

For more senior officers, the correlations between Items F29 and F30 and the officer's position on several career decisions were examined; in particular, whether or not they had decided to:

1. Obtain command quals or seek a designator change (correlations were examined only for LTs and LCDRs).
2. Prepare for a career outside of the Navy, or remain until the date they were eligible to retire (LTs through CDRs).
3. Strive for sea command (LCDRs and CDRs).
4. Seek a change to the Materiel-Professional Community (CDRs and CAPTs).

Obtained correlations ranged between +.14 and -.11, indicating that no appreciable relationship existed between attitudes toward NAVOP 105 and decisions concerned with an individual's commitment to a Navy career or the SWO community.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Most SWOs believed that greater specialization of department heads would result in increased departmental readiness, as well as increased fleet performance. It can thus be concluded that the perceptions of NAVOP 105 were quite positive, especially considering that the program has not been in effect long enough for even one officer to be trained and to complete his department head tour under the new guidelines. The only issue where a strong difference of opinion existed among officers was in relationship to the suggestion that more emphasis be placed on developing the technical competence of division officers instead of department heads. Many respondents felt that division officers already have too many demands placed on them.

It is interesting that perceptions of NAVOP 105 were not related to any of the career decisions studied in the research. Three possible explanations for this lack of relationship can be considered. First, the changes in the career path may not have been in place long enough to have had a perceptible impact. The process of implementing career policy change often involves overcoming traditional ways of viewing a career, as well as schooling officers on what the new career policy means for specific decisions. Additionally, the real meaning of the new policy often takes several years to be clear to officers in the fleet. Secondly, many of the changes in the career path involve areas not directly under the control of the individual officer. Thirdly, previous analysis of data contained in NAVPERSRANDCEN's FY82 data base on officer career development had indicated that specialization should not influence an officer's career intent. Thus, current data partially support the 1982 prediction.

While initial results indicate officer acceptance of NAVOP 105, care must be taken in implementing changes for two reasons. First, as noted, change in and of itself can become disruptive of effective career development; and, second, the full impact of these changes are not known. If changes must be made, special care should be taken to communicate the reasons for these changes.

One issue remains to be addressed. The present research is based on the perceptions of surface officers. While perceptions are highly relevant when measuring an officer's satisfaction with the Navy and his career, and his intention to remain in the Navy, they are less germane when measuring the impact of NAVOP 105 on officer performance or fleet readiness. Here, objective measures are needed to supplement perceptual data. Indeed, as part of NAVPERSRANDCEN's ongoing research on career development, Chatfield and Morrison (1987) attempted to build an evaluational technology that (as one of its capabilities) could determine the effect of NAVOP 105 on operational readiness. However, it was found that existing Navy measures of operational readiness were not reliable enough to permit effective evaluation of officer career paths.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Navy should evaluate the long term impact of NAVOP 105 on operational readiness and officer continuance decisions.
2. Research should be conducted at various points in time to determine if NAVOP 105 is the cause of increments or decrements in operational readiness and retention.
3. Efforts should be renewed to develop reliable measures of departmental and fleet readiness.

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